

Rio de Janeiro, Winter 2011

The cidade maravilhosa's expectations and contradictions¹

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Abstract

A Rio de Janeiro crossing during the Winter of 2011. Urban, social and economic contrasts and contradictions of a city that is preparing to host the World Cup in 2014 and the Games of the XXXI Olympiad in 2016. The 'street cleaning' of *cidade maravilhosa*: the next sporting competitions and respective 'showcasing' will show neither people living on the streets nor rampant drug trafficking. The city seems to look forward to the events while at the same time the common people have different opinions: from hopes of a new opportunity for Rio de Janeiro and Brazil, to fears of new contradictions, speculations and iniquities.

Keywords: Poverty, Development, Street children, World Cup, Olympic Games, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

During my flight to Rio de Janeiro an article of «La Vanguardia» caught my attention. The Catalan newspaper describes a *Retrato de la opulencia en tres países emergentes*.⁴ One of these is Brazil, where a new millionaire⁵ is born every hour and the luxury goods market is stronger than ever, even though prices are between 60 to 300% higher than in Europe and the United States. According to the correspondent, this phenomenon is explained by the rapid growth of the new rich and their ostentatious consumption.

Just a few days earlier, a London newspaper which accompanied my 'tube' trips had painted a different Brazilian reality:⁶ the latest police operation in the Rocinha slum in Rio de Janeiro. *Favela do Rosinha* is one of the biggest *favelas* in the world and just one of the 170 Rio de Janeiro's *favelas*. The operation was part of a broader plan to combat drug trafficking and security strengthening in the country preparing to host

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⁴ Ferdinando Garcia, Nuevos Ricos, *Cuando el precio es lo que menos importa*, «La Vanguardia», Barcelona, sábado, 26 Noviembre 2011.

⁵ According to the article, in Brazil there are 155,400 millionaires with one million dollars at least: it means there are more rich people than in Russia and India.

⁶ Hayden Smith, *Slumdogs of war*, «Metro», London, Monday, November 14, 2011.

the World Cup in 2014 and the Games of the XXXI Olympiad in 2016. Elsewhere I read of a true and proper ‘reclamation’ by means of tanks.⁷

The partial story with which I arrived in Rio de Janeiro seemed to reflect the contrasts and contradictions the city proffered during my short stay.⁸ Many people remember Rio because of its Copacabana and Ipanema beaches, the giant statue of Christ Redeemer, its carnival. For others: the Maracanà Stadium: currently undergoing a facelift like much of the city. I was fascinated by the contrasts of the urban landscape where modern skyscrapers coexist alongside an extensive urban forest and the *favelas* such as *Rocinha*, which run along the *morros*’ hillsides, evoking other contradictions.

Rio de Janeiro, the Brazilian capital until 1960, is now the centre of many important public works. Its tourism and urban development have been strong attracting factors for a lot of people from poorer rural areas of Brazil who have started living in the *favelas*. In the past, starting from the 1930’s, the mushrooming of make-do human settlements along the *morros* was the result of economic crises and the fall of the price of coffee. However the first *favelas* of Rio can be traced back to the end of 19th century when, in 1897, soldiers coming back from the Canudos Campaign, finding themselves without houses, occupied the area which is actually Morro da Providencia.

Distance and prejudice have traditionally characterized the relations between the *morros* (the people of the favelas) and the concrete (those living in urban districts). The dialogue and confrontation with the State have been complex and date back to the re-settlement politics implemented by the military junta (1968-1975). The first political attempt to address the problem was the demolition of about 60 *favelas*, the forced re-settlement of slum-dwellers and the persecution of leaders of associations combating implementation of forced re-settlement. From the Seventies to the Eighties, the apparent absence of government and public institutions brought to bear individual political-clientele initiatives and drug-traffic lords assumed great importance within the favelas. In the late Eighties, with the 1988 Constitution, the management of the favelas was given by the central government to municipalities. The 1992 *Plano Diretor* (Master Plan) of Rio de Janeiro brought about various innovations in the institutional approach to the favelas issue. The *Plano* provided, among other things, the inclusion of favelas in city maps and the assignment to the *Prefeitura* the task of urbanization, promotion of local participation and the transformation of favelas into *bairros populares* (low-cost neighborhoods). Today public intervention affirms the will

⁷ Roberto Da Rin, *Il Brasile bonifica le favelas di Rio de Janeiro con i carri armati per prepararsi ai Mondiali*, *Ilsole24ore.com*, sabato 26 Novembre 2011.

⁸ My stay in Rio de Janeiro was at the end of November and early December of 2011, when I take part to the International seminar *Espaço Social e Políticas Públicas: Meninos em Situação de Rua*, organized by the Center for Economic and Legal (CREG) and the Universidade Estadual do Rio de Janeiro (UERJ) and hosted by this last (Wednesday, November 30 and Thursday, December 1, 2011, Rio de Janeiro). On the same occasion I cooperated in the activities of the project *Protection of children and adolescents for a new culture of international solidarity through the participation of young people*, sponsored by UNICEF and CREG.

to integrate the *morros* with the concrete although hygiene and health risks, drug trafficking and related violence continue to be a big problem in Rio de Janeiro. In fact, within the favelas, the absence of a link between social rights and institutional representation facilitated the penetration of criminal gangs and drug lords who managed to establish solidarity relationship with the population historically trapped between obedience to organized crime and police violence.

I was introduced to some 'municipalized favelas' by Prof. Enzo Rossi who some years has done research and cooperation in Brazil with students of Tor Vergata University of Rome. With them and in collaboration with the *Associação Benéfica AMAR*, in 2009, a research on street children and adolescents of Rio was conducted. The findings of the research was presented in Rome at the Brazilian Embassy. During the presentation I could not help but emphasize the effectiveness of their interdisciplinary approach.

The *favela*, *Morro dos Macacos*, is situated not too far away from the headquarters of AMAR, where I was staying. Mauro Furlan, who is an educator and coordinator of the association's projects, told me that in the Fall of 2009, in this *favela*, twelve people were murdered and a police helicopter was shot down during a clash among criminal groups: the *Amigos dos Amigos* and the *Vermelho Commando* that invaded the *favela*. I could not help asking myself if the shots I occasionally heard during my stay at the Grajaú area were coming from the *favela* Morros dos Macacos.

I learned very soon in Rio de Janeiro that *comunidade* is the preferred term, rather than the derogatory *favela*, used for the first time by the Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística (IBGE) in the 1950 Census. In Belo Horizonte the preferred term is *aglomerado*.

The vortex of violence in the comunidades of Rio, the drug traffic problem and police high level corruption narrated by Maura Furlan reminded me of *Tropa de Elite* (José Padilha 2007 / 2010 and *Cidade de Deus* (Fernando Meirelles, 2002). Buscapè, the protagonist of the film, between dreams and fears, manages to release himself from the destiny of *favelados* and becomes a photo reporter.

The day after my arrival in Rio de Janeiro, some members of the Human Rights and Judicial Assistance Commission of Rio de Janeiro, including the President and a lawyer named Maria Margarida E. Pressburger, hosted a meeting and drew attention to: 'street cleaning' throughout Rio de Janeiro. They noted that the next sporting events hosted by the city will allow neither street people nor drug trafficking to be seen. So the 'cleaning' is not primarily aimed at solving the problem but in simply hiding it, at least temporarily. This draws the attention to the many *cracklandia* around the city: crack is relatively cheap compared to other drugs. In the case of children and adolescents, Brazilian law provides for their 'recovery' but this is often compromised by 'punishment'.

Prison replaces rehabilitative facilities. Psychotropics replace crack. 'Vice of medicine' replaces 'drug habit'.

Mauro Furlan, from the AMAR organization, told me about Padre Severino Institute of Rio de Janeiro. The institute, relating to DEGASE which is managed by the Police, should host 'temporarily' (no more than forty-five days) minors who have broken the law by offering a 'provisional socio-educational measure' before they are directed towards other educational spaces. The objective of the institution is the integration of juvenile deviants into society. This notwithstanding, the Institute is known as a place of violation of children's human rights, as well as a school of crime. Mauro Furlan remembers seeing shaved heads biting the dust and arms tied behind of young guests. Sometimes they are called with the number of the Penal Code article violated by them: 155 for theft, 157 for armed robbery, 121 for murder. In short, there is no possibility to reprocess the error and understand any pain caused. Rather condemnation, punishment, violence. Violation of the *Statuto della Criança e do Adolescente* (Law no. 8069 - July 13, 1990) adopted, according to some, *só para inglês ver*.⁹

In various meetings, the fact that Brazil is one of the world's countries with a high rate of economic growth was underlined. Recently, the country has also established a commitment for the protection of children and adolescents. The country has adopted and ratified international conventions for minors and has established specific laws and regulations in this regard. A major document of the Brazilian system in the protection of minors is represented, together with the Conventions on the Rights of Children of 1990, specifically by the *Statuto della Criança e do Adolescente* - which transposes to the internal national legal system the principal international conventions for the protection of children thus spelling out regulations on safeguarding minors in light of right to life and health, instruction, and educational rehabilitation. However, inspite of normative and institutional interventions in defence of minors, Brazil still has to address the problem of the effectiveness of its interventions to protect minors.

The regulatory and institutional framework to protect children and adolescents in Brazil, the gap between the modern, large and complex legislation and its effectiveness and the result of the persistent presence of street children and adolescents, often drug addicts, were the subject of a shared reflection during the International seminar *Espaço Social e Políticas Públicas: Meninos em Situação de Rua*, organized by the CREG and UERJ and hosted by the latter. The seminar attended by scholars including Irene Rizzini, internationally known for the children and adolescents investigation. The

⁹ The expression *só inglês para ver*, very common in Brazil, is used with reference to statements or actions just for show. It refers to the strong pressures that, in the early decades of the nineteenth century, came from anti-slavery England for the abolition of slavery in Brazil. Suddenly the country was placed between the need to reorganize an economy based entirely on the slavery exploitation and to meet the British demands. Hence the enactment of laws officially responded to these pressures but whose effectiveness was questionable. Among these, there is the law of 1831 which declared the blacks *importação* end from Africa to work as slaves in Brazil: the traffic really ended in 1852.

speakers included economists, sociologists and demographers. The academic world is home to national institutions and intergovernmental organizations involved in defending human rights and representatives of civil society organizations. I was informed that the presence of students was limited because of academic reasons, but I had to note their active participation and genuine interest in the rights of minors. I also noted the numerous activists, as well as common people, sustaining the rights of minors.

The seminar took me to the *favelas* that I could see from the terraces of UERJ. The seminar answered some questions and raised many more. It forced me to confront my present reflections on the local situation with my experience in the Dominican Republic.¹⁰ I found some elements of similarity between the two countries, starting from the problem posed by the system of protection of minors, i.e. the gap between the normative and institutional response, and the life situation actually experienced by children and adolescents. Even in the Dominican Republic, I had personal experience with the abuse perpetrated by the police. The police, who should be the guardians of order and should guarantee the protection of the weak, but are often protagonists of unjustified aggression, physical and verbal abuse, improper police procedures, arbitrary detention in degrading conditions, unfair and the discriminatory application of law, corruption and exploitation. With an assessment that would deserve deeper consideration, I think that probably in Santo Domingo the drug problem is not comparable in size to its extent in Rio de Janeiro. On the other hand, although the Dominican Republic does not record the level of economic development as Brazil does, the two countries also seem to share strong imbalances in the distribution of wealth. Wealth that is displayed ostentatiously. Price and money are the measures of the value of everything, including people. In this logic, the affirmation of a person's identity and self-esteem must be accompanied by forms of ostentatious consumption.

My stay at the AMAR headquarters gave me numerous occasions to meet street children and adolescents mentioned in the academic and institutional events I attended in Rio. These minors live in destitution: a fragile family situation – if any at all – and a low level of schooling. Many of them are of african descent. At my request, Sister Fatima explained to me that the association has among its objectives the establishment of dialogue and confidence, as well as building of self-esteem and support in the elaboration of a life-plan. Confusion, paralysis, and the lack of prospects for the future seem to characterize these children of an 'interrupted flight', Rossi would have said.

I slipped into some of the activities of the children – they are all very young. I was not fully confident of my interlocutor: I am secular and I have known organizations whose members feel and declare they are saving children the world over. At the AMAR

¹⁰ MARA CLEMENTE, *Storie dominicane. Uno studio qualitativo della prostituzione minorile in contesti di turismo sessuale*, Roma, Nuova Cultura, 2011.

centre, I detected a sense of humble reflection and self-criticism so different from self-gratifying attitudes I had seen elsewhere. Certainly far away from certain realities mentioned in *Tropa de Elite*, where the young rich of *Zona Sul* finance the drug market and become accomplices of organized criminals who dwell and cause bloodbath in the *favelas*.

I observed, aware that I was being observed. One AMAR volunteer asked me if I was afraid to walk alone on the streets of Rio. She immediately laughed and added that the most 'dangerous' are the children who attend the organization. The same children who curiously observed me and who sometimes embraced me. One of them invited me to play billiards. There were no balls so we used stones from the garden. Sister Fatima came with a ball and reminded the children not to *brigar* (quarrel) to have it. So far the *brigadeiros* I knew were the traditional carioca chocolates.

AMAR was not the only organization I got to know in Rio. I also got to know BEM TV. Besides the sharing of activities, I was informed of the recognition obtained in activities aimed at social change based on involvement and the social mobilization of adolescents and the young beneficiaries of projects. Many of these are involved in audiovisual the productions. Rio and the Brazil in general is well-known for music and football, but also for the 7th art. The city owns some of the major TV networks and diverse film and music production companies – does it explain the ubiquitous presence of televisions in bars and restaurants all over the city?

My carioca stay was coming to an end. Perhaps too early in light of the stimuli and the questions raised. Now remembering Rio de Janeiro I think of the long stretch of lights I was flying over before touchdown. I also remember the blue and the pink hues of sunset on a delightfully deserted beach: colors that encircle the entire *cidade maravilhosa* toning down the skyline with its skyscrapers and its urban contrasts. Not the social and economic contrasts.

The news of the collapse of three skyscrapers in Rua 13 de Maio, in Rio de Janeiro's center, at the end of January 2012, made me realise that the Rio de Janeiro operation face-lift, in view of the big sport events in the coming years, was far from over. In the case of the Olympic Games, this is the first time they are hosted by a Latin American city. The tourism industry has boomed in Rio de Janeiro: the city is conscious of the occasion and seems to wait with trepidation for the events that divide people. Events that encourage the idea of new opportunities for the city and the country and that fear new contradictions, speculations and iniquities. To know the impact of these events on the city and on its slums and street population, one should wait until everything is over and then do a well-researched study. I should return.